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Washington's Phantom War

The Effects of the U.S. Drone Program in Pakistan

Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann

One hot summer evening in 2009, in a small village in the remote Pakistani tribal agency of South Waziristan, a pair of Hellfire missiles fired from an unmanned Predator drone slammed into a house, killing the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, along with his wife. About a year later, in May 2010, down a dirt road from Miran Shah, the main town in North Waziristan, a missile from another Predator killed Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (known as Saeed al-Masri), a founding member of al Qaeda, along with his wife and several of their children.

These drone strikes were successful in killing high-level leaders of the Taliban and al Qaeda. But few are. On average, only one out of every seven U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan kills a militant leader. The majority of those killed in such strikes are not important insurgent commanders but rather low-level fighters, together with a small number of civilians. In total,

according to our analysis, less than two percent of those killed by U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan have been described in reliable press accounts as leaders of al Qaeda or allied groups. Not a single drone strike had targeted Osama bin Laden before he was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs on May 2. Meanwhile, al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has not been targeted by a drone since 2006.

The U.S. drone program has its roots in the late 1990s, when unmanned—and unarmed—aircraft tracked and spied on al Qaeda in Afghanistan. After 9/11, then U.S. President George W. Bush ordered U.S. drones, at that point equipped with missiles, to kill leaders of al Qaeda, first in Afghanistan and later in Yemen and Pakistan. From June 2004, when the strikes in Pakistan began, to January 2009, the Bush administration authorized 44 strikes in the rugged northwestern region of Pakistan. Since assuming office, Barack Obama

PETER BERGEN is Director of the National Security Studies Program at the New America Foundation and the author of *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*. KATHERINE TIEDEMANN is a Research Fellow at the National Security Studies Program at the New America Foundation and a doctoral student in political science at George Washington University.

has greatly accelerated the program, likely as a result of better on-the-ground intelligence in Pakistan. In just two years, the Obama administration authorized nearly four times as many drone strikes as did the Bush administration throughout its entire time in office—or an average of one strike every four days, compared with one every 40 days under Bush. (The drones are launched from air bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan but are controlled by pilots in the United States.)

As the pace of the drone strikes has increased, so, too, has their accuracy. During the first two years of the Obama administration, around 85 percent of those reported killed by drone strikes were militants; under the Bush administration, it was closer to 60 percent. The number of civilians killed by the drone strikes is controversial. On the high end, some Pakistani official sources estimate that 700 civilians were killed in 2009 alone. The U.S. government, meanwhile, has claimed that the drone program was responsible for fewer than 30 civilian deaths between May 2008 and May 2010.

Civilian and military leaders in Washington describe the drone program as a success in U.S. counterterrorism efforts. In remarks that are indicative of the enthusiasm among U.S. officials for the strikes, in late 2008 then CIA Director Michael Hayden said that al Qaeda and its allies in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had suffered "significant" losses and were feeling "less secure today" than they had just a few months earlier.

TRIBAL VIOLENCE

In order to investigate the real civilian fatality rate and the impact of the drone strikes on al Qaeda and its allies, we

developed an open-source database of every U.S. drone strike reported in Pakistan since 2004. (The database is available at www.newamerica.net/drones.) Such a project is not without difficulties—reporting in the tribal areas is challenging—but our research is based on reliable accounts from Western and Pakistani media outlets with deep reporting capabilities in the region.

One of the primary challenges in producing an accurate count of fatalities from drone strikes is the divergent incentives for U.S. officials and for militants: Washington claims that almost all those killed in the drone strikes are militants, whereas militants and locals often claim that the victims are civilians. Even determining who is a militant and who is a civilian is often impossible given the environment of the tribal areas, a place where insurgents live among the civilian population and do not wear uniforms.

According to our data, as of early April 2011, U.S. drones had struck targets in northwestern Pakistan 233 times. Most of these strikes took place in the preceding year and a half. From June 2004 to April 7, 2011, drone strikes killed somewhere between 1,435 and 2,283 people, of whom between 1,145 and 1,822 were described as militants in reliable press accounts. This suggests that over the life of the program, the percentage of fatalities who were militants has been around 80 percent; in 2010, that figure rose to 95 percent. This increase in accuracy is likely the result of better coordination between Pakistani and U.S. intelligence agencies, the smaller missiles now fired by the drones, and the drones' increasing ability to linger many hours over a target, which better allows their U.S. pilots to distinguish militants from civilians.

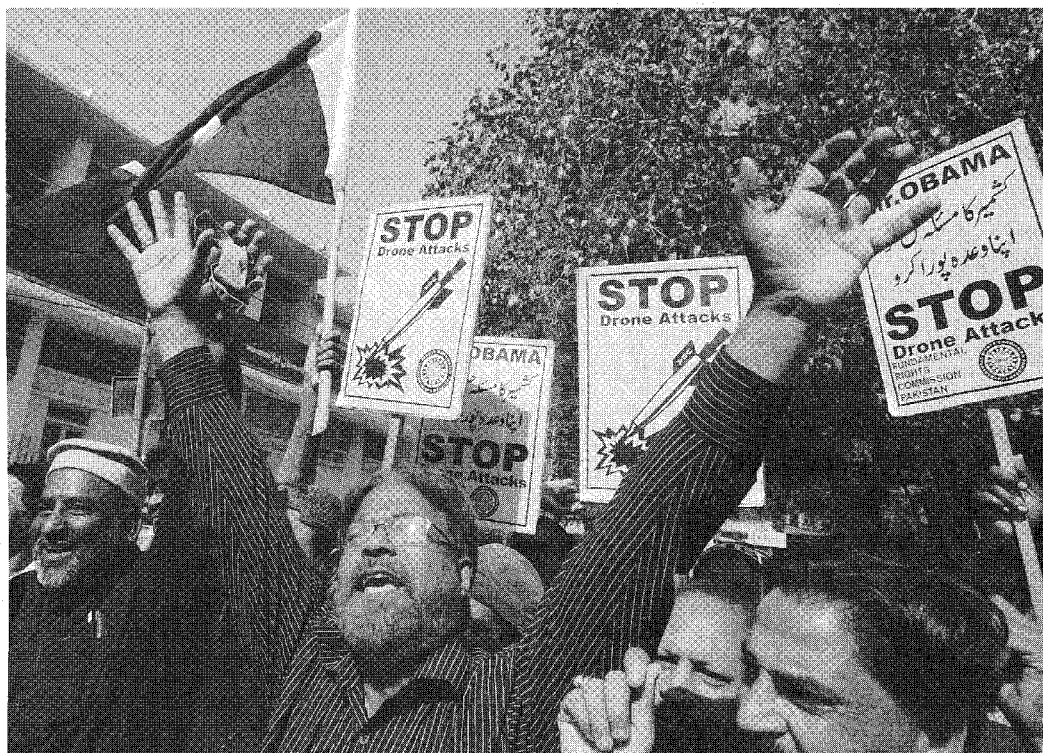
Tallying the number of militants killed is of limited use, however, unless one can answer the more salient question: What impact has the drone program had on the insurgency in Pakistan and, by extension, that in Afghanistan? After all, much of the violence in both countries emanates from the tribal regions, which are overwhelmingly targeted by the strikes. Here, the evidence is equivocal. Although the strikes have killed more than 1,000 militants, including 33 insurgent leaders, violence in Pakistan has gone up dramatically since the program began, from only 150 terrorist incidents in 2004 to a peak of 1,916 in 2009 (according to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center), although the increase first ticked up in 2007, a year before the frequency of the drone strikes began to pick up. In Afghanistan, the number of suicide attacks tripled in the first half of 2010 compared to the same period in 2009. Although a number of factors could have contributed to these increases—militant retaliation for Pakistani military operations, for example, or for the increased raids by U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan—it appears that the drone strikes are not damaging the insurgencies in Pakistan and Afghanistan as much as Washington would like.

What is clear is that the drone strikes have not deterred Western would-be terrorists from traveling to Pakistan's tribal regions for training in militant camps. In 2009, as many as 150 such American and European recruits went to the tribal areas for training, and last year, both British and German citizens were reportedly killed in drone strikes. Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan American coffee-cart vendor who plotted to attack Manhattan subways in the fall of 2009, and Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani

American who tried to detonate a car bomb in Times Square the following spring, both had received training in Pakistan's tribal regions, even as the drone campaign was gathering steam. Militants trained in Waziristan—believed to be mostly German citizens affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a group with ties to al Qaeda—plotted a Mumbai-style attack that sparked a terror alert across Europe in the fall of 2010, according to senior U.S. counterterrorism officials.

Some Pakistani politicians, such as Imran Khan, a former cricket player and founder of the political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, and some Western counterinsurgency analysts, such as David Kilcullen, a former Australian military officer who was a top adviser to General David Petraeus, have argued that the drone strikes are counterproductive because they stoke anger against the United States among the Pakistani public, potentially adding to the pool of militant recruits. The program is indeed unpopular in Pakistan: according to a 2009 Gallup poll, only nine percent of Pakistanis support the strikes. A similar survey conducted last year by the New America Foundation in North Waziristan, where the vast majority of the drone strikes have been reported, found that only ten percent of the population favors them.

Such skepticism may stem from the perception of many Pakistanis that the drone program is inaccurate: more than half the respondents to the New America Foundation survey said that they thought the strikes kill mostly civilians. Such a belief, in turn, could also explain why nearly two-thirds of those polled in Pakistan's tribal areas said that suicide attacks against U.S. military targets are justified. This is an especially significant finding, as the United



REUTERS

Pakistanis protesting U.S. drone attacks in Hyderabad, February 4, 2009

Nations has reported that as many as 80 percent of those who carry out suicide attacks in Afghanistan come from these regions.

Another problem with the drone strikes is that since they eliminate militants before they can be apprehended and questioned, the program precludes the possibility of gaining any useful intelligence from those killed. Dead militants, of course, can offer no insights into planned operations. (For the Obama administration, this may present an incidental advantage: those killed do not enter the clogged legal morass of Guantánamo.)

SWATTING AT WASPS

Despite the drone program's shortcomings, it is likely to continue—put simply, Washington has no better military options for combating the anti-Western militants who have made their home in Pakistan's tribal

areas. Pakistan's army has proved itself unwilling or unable to clear out the Taliban and other insurgent groups from North Waziristan, where around 90 percent of last year's drone strikes took place. Although the Pakistani armed forces have in recent years undertaken operations in the six other agencies of FATA, the military's high command remains resistant to attacking North Waziristan, a base of the Haqqani network, al Qaeda and other foreign fighters, and local Taliban militants, some of whom Pakistan views as a hedge against Indian influence in the region. Pakistan's ambassador to United States, Husain Haqqani, has argued that Pakistan is not in a position to begin an offensive in North Waziristan because its military is already stretched thin by its work on reconstruction efforts necessitated by the country's devastating floods in the

summer of 2010. And Pakistan's powerful army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has resisted the efforts of countless U.S. officials to convince him to attack the insurgents based in North Waziristan. Kayani, it seems, is concerned not only with overcommitting his already overstretched forces but also with retaining the loyalty of the Haqqani network, which has long been an asset of Pakistani military intelligence, according to U.S. officials.

The military alternatives to drone strikes in the tribal areas—U.S. Special Forces operations using ground troops, for example, or conventional NATO-led air strikes—are not supported by Pakistani officials and would be met with strong resistance. In September 2008, U.S. commandos carried out a raid against alleged al Qaeda and Taliban militants just over the border from Afghanistan in South Waziristan, angering Kayani, who said that Pakistan's sovereignty would be defended "at all cost." Two years later, when NATO helicopters flew into Pakistani airspace in the Kurram Agency, Pakistan's reaction was even harsher—officials closed the Torkham border crossing, a key link in NATO's supply lines to Afghanistan. Last December, when a report in *The New York Times* suggested that Washington might be interested in expanding U.S. special operations raids into Pakistani territory, Ambassador Haqqani immediately registered his disapproval and noted that no foreign forces would be allowed to operate inside Pakistan. And the operation that killed bin Laden was met with outcries from Pakistani officials concerned about violations of the country's sovereignty.

Behind the scenes, many Pakistani officials—including President Asif Ali

Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani—have supported the drone strikes, despite their occasional public protests. In a State Department cable from August 2008, just when Washington was ramping up the drone program, Gilani said, "I don't care if they [the Americans] do it as long as they get the right people. We'll protest in the National Assembly and then ignore it." A few months later, Zardari gave his blessing to the program with the brusque comment, "Kill the seniors. Collateral damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me." And of course, the greatest proof of Islamabad's cooperation is the fact that the program has continued; for the strikes to be even minimally successful, they require some coordination with Pakistan's military and intelligence services. As one U.S. official commented, "You need guys on the ground to tell you who they [militant targets] are, and that isn't coming from some white guy running around the FATA."

Although Pakistani officials have recently resumed their public criticism of the strikes, Islamabad has some strong reasons to cooperate. The strikes routinely kill enemies of the Pakistani state, such as Mehsud, who targeted police officers, soldiers, and civilians across the country with suicide bombings.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the strikes are also having an effect on the insurgents' morale and operational practices. Low-level militants have grown to fear the drones, which some have dubbed *machay*, or "wasps," for the buzzing sound they make as they hover for hours before or after attacks. David Rohde, the *New York Times* reporter who was held by the Haqqani network for over seven months in North and South Waziristan in 2008 and

2009, wrote later that “the drones [were] a terrifying presence that . . . unnerved and angered the guards.” Today, Haqqani fighters set up camp in groups no larger than ten men to avoid attracting the attention of the Predators and Reapers patrolling the skies above them. Some militants in North Waziristan have reportedly gone so far as to take up living in underground tunnels.

Finally, it is important to remember that Pakistan’s tribal areas are a major source of human and material support for attacks against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, according to the United Nations. Washington is therefore loath to abandon, or even slow down, a program that may have any kind of positive effects in taming this troublesome region. Lacking other military alternatives and facing a persistent threat from the tribal areas, the U.S. program of drone strikes is not likely to end in the near future. As Leon Panetta, the outgoing CIA director, once said, the drone program is “the only game in town.”

ISLAMABAD'S RESPONSIBILITY

Given the CIA’s embrace of drones, the strikes will surely continue—although Washington should think carefully about how to manage them more effectively. So far, the United States has paid too little attention to how the strikes are seen in Pakistan—especially given the country’s centrality to U.S. counterterrorism efforts and the increasingly large role played by the drone program in those efforts.

There are a number of steps Washington could take to make the drone strikes more palatable to Pakistanis concerned about civilian casualties and violations of their country’s sovereignty. To begin with, the United States should make the program

more of an operational partnership with Pakistan, recognizing Pakistan’s desire for a reduced number of strikes while continuing to pursue the countries’ shared interest in eliminating the remaining leaders of al Qaeda and the leaders of other extremist groups in the tribal areas. Additionally, U.S. and Pakistani officials should be more forthcoming about the program’s existence. Every drone strike in northwestern Pakistan is covered by the media, which report casualties, locations, and targets. Given such reporting, the two governments’ refusal to discuss the program openly only fuels rumors and paranoia among the general public.

Making the drone program more transparent, perhaps by releasing some of the CIA’s videotaped footage of the strikes, would have several benefits: For one thing, researchers would be able to evaluate U.S. claims that few civilians are being killed. More openness would also reveal to the Pakistani public their government’s support for and involvement in the program. In March, the Pakistani military took an important step in this direction by offering its own statistics about the drone strikes conducted between 2007 and 2010 in North Waziristan. Major General Mehmood Ghayur, the top commander in the area, told reporters that “a majority of those eliminated are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements,” adding that drone strikes in the agency had killed nearly 1,000 militants in four years. His comments were the first official Pakistani acknowledgment that the drone program is killing large numbers of insurgent fighters.

In fact, the war against the militants is Pakistan’s more than it is the United States’—some 4,000 Pakistanis have been killed by insurgents since mid-2007—

and a more open accounting of Pakistan's involvement in the drone war would underscore this reality. It would also likely bolster public support for the program: polling in the tribal areas suggests that if the Pakistani military were seen to be more involved, opposition to the drone strikes would subside dramatically. Indeed, Zardari said in April that he would like the Obama administration to share drone technology with his country so that future strikes could happen under a "Pakistani flag." The United States has taken some small steps in this direction, offering to send a dozen Shadow and 85 Raven drones to Pakistan for surveillance purposes.

Washington should transfer responsibility for the drones flying over Pakistan from the CIA to the U.S. military. The CIA's control of the program in Pakistan is more a legacy of its longtime dominance of operations targeting al Qaeda than a reflection of any special expertise in drone warfare. Military control would have several advantages. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Libya, where U.S. drone programs are already controlled by the Pentagon, U.S. military lawyers ensure that the strikes conform to the laws of war, whereas in Pakistan, whatever vetting processes the CIA observes remain opaque. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military also tends to pay compensation for accidental civilian deaths, whereas Pakistani civilians in the tribal areas can seek little legal or material recourse from the United States when their relatives are slain. Military control of the drone program in Pakistan would also place the strikes more clearly in the chain of command and link U.S. actions in eastern Afghanistan more directly with those in Pakistan's tribal regions. Coordinated Afghan-U.S. military oper-

ations now give the Afghan government more ownership over security conditions in Afghanistan. A similar arrangement should be struck in Pakistan.

A more transparent drone-strike program, with greater overt cooperation from Pakistan, would increase accountability, in particular regarding civilian casualties. It would also help lessen the fervent anti-Americanism in Pakistan by demonstrating that the war against militants in the tribal regions is in the interests of both Pakistan and the United States. Washington may have started the war in Pakistan's skies, but it cannot be finished without Islamabad. ☪